

Critique of the Heritage Institute's Position on Somaliland's Quest for Self-Determination

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Introduction

The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS), based in Mogadishu, is a leading think tank specializing in governance, development, and geopolitics in Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa. While its research often reflects a deep understanding of the region, its treatment of Somaliland's self-determination campaign has been critiqued for aligning with the Somali Federal Government's (FGS) narrative of preserving national unity. This alignment influences the framing of its reports, where Somaliland's aspirations for independence are often minimized in favor of advocating for Somali reconciliation. This article critiques HIPS's position on Somaliland, examining the biases in its approach and the implications for Somaliland's quest for international recognition.

Background: Somaliland's Case for Independence

Somaliland declared independence in 1991 following the collapse of Somalia's central government and decades of marginalization under the Siad Barre regime. Since then, it has developed into a stable, self-governing region with functioning democratic institutions, regular elections, and an active civil society. Unlike Somalia, which continues to grapple with insecurity and political instability, Somaliland has demonstrated remarkable progress in governance and economic development.

From a legal perspective, Somaliland's claim to independence is grounded in its colonial history as the British Somaliland Protectorate. After briefly gaining independence in 1960, Somaliland voluntarily united with Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. However, grievances over unequal power distribution and economic neglect led to the 1991 decision to secede. Somaliland meets the Montevideo Convention's criteria for statehood, including a defined territory, a permanent population, an effective government, and the capacity to enter international relations. Despite these qualifications, its recognition remains stalled due to geopolitical concerns and a global preference for preserving Somalia's territorial integrity (Modern Diplomacy, 2024; Heritage Institute, 2024).

The Heritage Institute's Approach to Somaliland

The Heritage Institute's position on Somaliland reflects its emphasis on Somali unity. The institute frequently promotes dialogue between Somaliland and the Somali Federal Government as the primary resolution mechanism but frames the desired outcome as reconciliation within a unified Somalia. This implicitly prioritizes the FGS's interests over Somaliland's claims to independence.

In its analyses, HIPS acknowledges Somaliland's stability and governance achievements but often uses these as a point of critique against the FGS rather than as validation of Somaliland's capacity for statehood. By downplaying Somaliland's historical grievances and framing recognition as destabilizing, the institute perpetuates a narrative that limits Somaliland's legitimacy as a self-determining state (Heritage Institute, 2024).

HIPS also emphasizes the risks associated with recognizing Somaliland. These include fears of encouraging other secessionist movements across Africa, complicating Somalia's fragile state-building process, and straining relations with neighboring countries like Ethiopia and Djibouti. While these concerns are valid, the institute rarely discusses the potential benefits of recognizing Somaliland, such as stabilizing the Horn of Africa through the formalization of its de facto governance structures (Modern Diplomacy, 2024).

Framing Bias in HIPS Publications

One of the most notable biases in HIPS's approach is its marginalization of the atrocities committed against Somaliland's population during the Siad Barre regime. The Hargeisa genocide, during which thousands of civilians were killed, is often mentioned briefly but not explored as a justification for Somaliland's secession. International norms frequently validate secession in cases of severe human rights abuses, yet this argument is largely absent from HIPS's analyses (Heritage Institute, 2024).

The institute also promotes dialogue between Somaliland and the FGS without addressing the unequal dynamics in these negotiations. Somaliland often includes opposition figures and civil society representatives in its delegations, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity. In contrast, the FGS's delegations tend to be centralized and less representative. HIPS's failure to critique this imbalance undermines its advocacy for meaningful dialogue (Heritage Institute, 2024).

Additionally, HIPS focuses heavily on Somaliland's lack of international recognition but rarely highlights its diplomatic successes. For example, Somaliland has built strong partnerships with Ethiopia, the UAE, and other regional actors, demonstrating its capacity for international engagement. By omitting these achievements, HIPS reinforces

a narrative of isolation rather than acknowledging Somaliland's proactive foreign policy (Modern Diplomacy, 2024).

Implications of HIPS's Narrative

The Heritage Institute's alignment with the Somali Federal Government's narrative has several implications for Somaliland's recognition campaign. By framing dialogue as the sole solution to the impasse, HIPS limits the scope of policy options, neglecting recognition as a legitimate and potentially stabilizing outcome.

Furthermore, the institute's emphasis on Somaliland's internal challenges, such as clan conflicts and governance issues, detracts from its achievements and reinforces stereotypes of instability. This approach undermines Somaliland's case for statehood and influences international perceptions, discouraging global actors from supporting its recognition (Heritage Institute, 2024).

Conclusion: The Need for Balanced Analysis

The Heritage Institute's focus on Somali unity comes at the expense of a balanced assessment of Somaliland's independence aspirations. To foster a more equitable discourse, the institute should acknowledge Somaliland's legal and historical claims to statehood, explore recognition as a viable outcome of negotiations, and critically assess the FGS's role in perpetuating the stalemate.

Somaliland's pursuit of recognition is a complex issue requiring nuanced analysis. By adopting a more balanced approach, institutions like HIPS can contribute to a resolution that respects Somaliland's legitimate aspirations while addressing Somalia's need for stability.

About the Author

Mustafe Jambir is a researcher specializing in geopolitics and foreign relations, currently based in Hargeisa, Somaliland. With over a decade of experience in analyzing political dynamics and their implications on development, he has published numerous articles and reports on issues related to the Horn of Africa. Mustafe holds a Master's degree in International Relations and has a strong focus on the intersection of regional stability and humanitarian efforts. His insights into Somaliland's political landscape and international relations are informed by extensive field research and engagement with local communities.

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